RURAL RECONSTRUCTION—PHILOSOPHY, PRACTICE AND PERSPECTIVE *

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I am grateful to the organisers of this Seminar—the United States Information Service and the Sardar Vallabhbhai Vidyapeeth—for inviting me to deliver this address.

I accepted this invitation with considerable diffidence which I still feel in thinking of my assignment in terms of a ‘keynote address’. This requires a performance in the best tradition of oration, which in these days is the privileged preserve of politicians. Nor is it possible to get far enough by thinking only of the keynote and trying to harp on it. I am reminded of the exasperation that a cellist caused to his wife by playing a single note on his cello day in and day out. When, unable to stand it anymore, she asked him why he kept his finger always in one place unlike other cellists whose fingers moved up and down, he replied, “They are still looking for the place, while I have found it.”

I am afraid, I am one of those who are still looking for the ‘place’, especially in a field like rural reconstruction. I, therefore, hope you will bear with me if I try to take you out on a detour of this field of thought and action, rather than tell you merely about the destination. This is the reason why the title of this address has been formulated so broadly and rather ambitiously. My objective is to take

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a look at the whole field of rural reconstruction and open it up, so to speak, for further pursuit. Starting with an analysis of the philosophical basis underlying rural reconstruction efforts in the country, the address will proceed on to a critical survey of the form and content of such efforts and end with an indication of the future perspective.

PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF RURAL RECONSTRUCTION

Rural reconstruction has a fairly long history in our country. All through the first half of this century, there was a continuing debate among the leaders of the country on the content of nationalism in India. The culture and civilisation of the land were the sources from which the elements of unity that bind together peoples into a nation were sought. In the later part of the nineteenth century, this debate was confined largely to the urban elite. Partly as a reaction against the arm-chair brand of nationalism, and partly as a result of the realisation of the need for looking within, a few leaders started thinking of the place of the village in the emerging polity of the nation. To them it was not an idle discussion; they were seriously concerned with the building up of the nation and finding a way to forge together the rural and the urban peoples. Rural reconstruction thus began to emerge as a programme. Faith and idealism characterised much of the approach at that time, particularly among those who were seriously concerned with imparting to it some substance and a shape. The names that readily come to one’s mind in this connection are Rabindra Nath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. There were, however, others like Spancer Hatch and F. L. Brayne who devoted themselves to specific tasks of rural uplift or rural reconstruction without being a part of the national struggle. I shall only touch upon some of the strains of the thought of Gandhiji and Tagore in this connection.

Since the 1890’s, Tagore had been talking and writing about the ways in which the peoples of this country should be organised, educated and reconstructed. He was stressing the urgent need for developing self-confidence and strength and in that connection emphasised the neglect, poverty, exploitation and helplessness which had become the lot of the village people. All through his life, he considered reconstruction of rural life no less important a goal than the political struggle for national
freedom. In fact, he considered this a far more difficult task than political agitation and spared no opportunity to exhort his countrymen to take up rural reconstruction as a movement with the goal of building up the human and institutional base so necessary for the growth of a free nation. Gandhiji also attached the same order of importance and urgency to the efforts for the improvement of the conditions of villages and villagers. But he did not look at it as a movement that can even nationally be looked at separately from the struggle for national independence. To him the two were inextricably mixed up; rural reconstruction represented the constructive work for nation-building, which together with political activities would lead the Nation to freedom and moral victory. I have put this distinction probably far more strongly than it was in reality: for Tagore never wanted the Freedom struggle to be stopped if it was not accompanied or preceded by attempts at rural reconstruction. What he desired was that at least some persons should not be lured away to barren agitational activities but would work for a movement towards rural reconstruction.

Both Gandhiji and Tagore conceived of rural reconstruction as a movement and a strategy for achieving the goals of the political and social systems that they advocated. In some respects, their analysis of the social and economic conditions in the country was similar. Thus, both of them recognised the polarisation between the city and the village that had been taking place in India as a result of the forces realised during the British rule. They saw signs of decay in the villages, the breaking down of the old community and the social system; and these along with a purposeless drift in the cities and the sacrifice of the basic social values like trusteeship in relation to wealth and property were causing disruption of the body politic, social and economic. Both, in their own way, succeeded in drawing the attention of the educated urban people to the condition of the villagers—their poverty, exploitation, ignorance and degeneration—which were weakening the fabric of the rural society and of the nation. In a way, both looked at rural reconstruction as the means for achieving National Integration and building the base of an idealised society.

There were, however, differences in the philosophy of these two great men. Their vision of the idealised society was different in many
ways. Some of the differences, particularly those of form, did resolve themselves because both the personalities underwent some shifts in their emphasis in the course of their life. But certain others remained and I may refer briefly to these.

Tagore looked at the man in the village more than the village. His philosophy of rural reconstruction was based on his analysis of the conditions necessary for the growth of a free mind in a free society of strong, confident individuals trusting and cooperating with each other, improving their position through the application of the results of scientific and technological advance, yet not giving up the basic and enduring aspects of their cultural heritage. His was a plea for the development of man in his totality, society in all its creative harmony and life in its entirety. Particular economic pursuits like crafts or agriculture or particular forms of organisation were to serve this objective. Social organisation and even recreational and cultural pursuits had their place, for he wanted his rural brothers to be cheerful also. The vehicle for bringing about such a transformation was knowledge, education, science, organisations and institutions.

What Tagore was after was the creation of a live dynamic and functionally oriented society in the villages, that would take the place of a decaying organism that had lost its self-propulsion mechanism. His exhortation to the Nation for turning its attention inward to the villages was a part of his attempt to secure a harmonious integration of cities and villages, classes and masses. He always made it clear that what he wanted to see re-established in the village was not its rusticity but the generous motherly open-mindedness that had preserved our rural culture and given a stability to rural life through the ages. His deep respect for some of the rural values was evident in his oft-quoted saying that "you can never hope to improve villages if you go there with an attitude of doing good to the villagers; for in that process you will only be insulting them." Back of all this was Tagore’s political and social philosophy which was centred round man and society. He envisaged *Samaj* or society as a greater organism than *State* and did not believe that Government could sustain society through its fiat and administration. Society could be helped by the State; but to be able to receive and make the best use of such help, it should be reformed and reconstructed.
Such reconstruction would imply building up the basic values and attitudes of individuals and could not be brought about through the imposition of grafting of a few institutions under the aegis of the Government. He was afraid that if the first did not take place, even the best of democratic institutions would become inefficient and corrupt.

Gandhiji also emphasised the need for transforming the values of the individual and building up the nation from the base. His philosophy of rural reconstruction was built on the principle of *ahimsa* or non-violence which led to the search for a social and political order in which moral values would be the guide and social and economic activities would be organised on a non-exploitative, service basis. The logical corollary of this approach was the equation of production with consumption at the lowest feasible level of the producing unit. Apart from the individual, the village thus became a crucial unit in the socio-political organisation of the nation. Gandhiji did not distinguish between society and state in the same way that Tagore did. In his scheme, the two would have the same organisation and guiding principles, a structure built from the villages upward and functioning according to the dictates of non-violence (*ahimsa*), love and social trusteeship. These were not matters of idle speculation, on the part of Gandhiji. He, far more than Tagore, gave concrete shape and meaningful symbols to his philosophy. He gave *Charkha* (spinning wheel) its symbolic as well as substantive role in the establishment of *Swaraj*.

Without going into further details, let me give you what I consider some of the elements of Gandhiji’s approach that are relevant for the discussion in the later part of this address. In the first place, he emphasised the need for as much of self-sufficiency in the individual and the village as is possible. Science and Technology, if it does not serve this purpose, are to be ignored, at least till all the villages of India have been organised and re-rebuilt so as to ensure a basic minimum level of consumption. Tagore, however, emphasised *self-reliance, not self-sufficiency*, in the individual and the village. Secondly, Gandhiji wanted a basic moral attitude in the individual in respect of possession, ownership and consumption of material goods. Apart from creating a spirit of social trust in the owners of material goods, he wanted them to voluntarily limit their demand
for goods and services once it went beyond their own capacity to produce. The goal of rising consumption and level of living was not, according to him, a justifiable one. Thirdly, he wanted everyone to learn to use his hands and engage in manual labour. The last point I may mention is Gandhiji’s concern for the harijans and the weaker sections. This was a responsibility he squarely placed on the community.

PRACTICE AND PERSPECTIVE

One of the terminological casualties in the post-Independence era is the expression, ‘rural reconstruction.’ The Constituent Assembly debates brought out the sharp differences of opinion between those who wanted the village panchayats to be the base of democracy in the country and others who thought there was very little of value left in this body. In any case, the Constitution gave us our fundamental rights based on justice, liberty and equality of individuals. Then came the era of planning and along with it the concepts of community development and rural development. We no longer speak of rural reconstruction but only of community development and rural development.

The pre-independence attempts at rural reconstruction were largely of an experimental nature, though Gandhiji succeeded in establishing on a sound footing a set of institutions to look after Khadi, village industries, education and harijan welfare. I would not like to discuss these while talking of the practices of rural reconstruction; but would much rather go on to some of the fundamentals of the community development programme that was ushered in in 1952. I must mention, however, that the philosophy and the efforts sponsored by both Gandhiji and Tagore were based on the concept of community development. There was, therefore, no departure from the principle underlying community development but the forms and the content were given new orientation and new direction.

In one respect, however, there was a fundamental difference. In community development, the Government became the central agency of promotion, administration and sustenance. It took upon itself the responsibility for giving shape to the concept, incorporating as a method of welfare administration and of extension, linking it to the objective of minimum development of an area unit and for generating
a movement around it. Looking back, one can easily say that this was a much greater burden than the Government of a newly independent country could successfully bear. But there were pressures and historical as well as political reasons.

I do not have time to discuss in detail the different aspects of the community or rural development programme and our experience with it over the last twelve years. Instead, let me first enumerate the achievements. We have, for the first time in history, a uniform pattern of local administration all over the country. This administration is geared to serving the people and furthering their welfare. We have, for the first time, an extension agency charged with the responsibility of helping the rural communities improve their agriculture and craft, and secure the basic minimum of amenities. We have again accepted the goal of transformation of the rural society as a joint partnership of the Government and the people, a joint venture which people will initially co-operate with the Government in, and later pursue themselves with help from the latter. Finally, we have established a set of institutions and organisations to help the leaders, train some of the village people and provide them with material supplies and support. And, our last step has been to hand over all this machinery to the elected bodies at different levels.

Our achievements, when considered in the abstract, look quite substantial. But, when compared to the gravity of the problems of poverty, faction, tension etc. in the rural society, they do not give any cause for complacency. There are a number of areas where our progress has been very slow. Let me give you a brief enumeration of some of these. In the first place, we have not really succeeded in tackling the problem of providing enough employment and a basic minimum level of living to the mass of the people. It is only in the Fourth Plan that this problem is being grappled with. Secondly, our progress in the field of community organisation seems to be not yet on very firm ground. One problem that faces us is the confine of the community and relates to obtaining a clear picture of the extent to which it operates in various spheres of group action. In particular, we are not sure as to how far the community functions in activities like agriculture. Next comes the problem of the weaker sections for
whom the community by and large has not accepted any clear responsibility. There is also the aspect of social education that seems to be losing its direction in the maze of more urgent activities. Finally, there is the whole question of the role of the village and the method by which it is to be raised to a self-reliant status.

These are some of the questions not only of the present but also of the future. I have merely raised them without trying to offer any solution. I will only offer one view by way of conclusion. No effort for community or rural development can succeed unless it seeks to improve the basic human element. These have been the teachings of Gandhiji and Tagore. Supplies and services are necessary and have to be provided in right time and adequate quantities. Along with these, there is to be a clear understanding and acceptance of the basic social and economic reforms and a certainty in their implementation. These are some of the issues which I hope, will be discussed in fuller detail in the course of the Seminar.
સ્વાતંત્રતા પહેલાંના આ પ્રકાર આત્માની પ્રેયોગિકતા હતી, જો તે ગણેશભાઈ આ પ્રેયોગને સાહસમાં પામી ઉપર રીતે લેવાયા. આ સમયે પશુની સામૂહિક વિકાસના કાર્યક્રમની માધ્યમાં ગણેશીલ અને રામજીના સ્વતંત્ર શાખામાં ધરાવતા છે. તે ઘરેઘર પણ તેના સપર્દા અને કામ કલ્યાણ કરી દીધું છે. દેશામાં આલ્યાલયાલય અને રાયલી કોઇ વિકાસની જવાબદારી રાખે પ્રથી લખી છે. હવે વિદ્યારંભ કાય છે કે ક્યાં નરીનીય સરકાર માટે આ નરીનીય બંધુ સમી હતી. આ પ્રતિભા દ્વારા આ પશુઓ પ્રેક્ષક સાહાય સેવાઓ છે. આ પશુઓ વિકાસ અને વિજ્ઞાન માટે સૌગધ વિશેષાતાને કૌશુય કરી શકાશે છે. હવે તે તંત્રને પ્રેક્ષક અધિકારીને લખી લખી હતી. એનાં સહાય તથા સ્વતંત્રી શ્રીશાખા સુધી પણ સાહાય્ય અને આ પ્રેક્ષક અધિકારી શ્રીશાખા સુધી અભીનાત અગળ વધી હતી. આ સહાય તથા શ્રીશાખાના પ્રોના અધિકારીને લખી લખી હતી. પ્રોના અધિકારી શ્રીશાખા અને પ્રોના મેનેઝમેંટ લીંબ માટે શ્રીશાખા સ્વતંત્ર બની શકે છે. લખી લખીના સાહાય્ય તથા સ્વતંત્ર સેવાઓ વધી હતી. પ્રોના અધિકારી શ્રીશાખા અને પ્રોના મેનેઝમેંટ લીંબ જો સહાય તથા સ્વતંત્ર સેવાઓ વધી હતી.